

Chapter Two: Nashville

In Chapter Two, titled "Nashville," John Lewis recounts his arrival in Nashville on September 8, 1957, where he begins his studies at the American Baptist Theological Seminary. At seventeen, Lewis is away from home for the first time, carrying with him a trunk gifted by his uncle. The seminary, situated on a picturesque campus by the Cumberland River, has been preparing African Americans for ministry since 1924, despite its founding being influenced by a desire to keep Black Baptists from attending white institutions.

As Lewis settles into Griggs Hall, he experiences a newfound independence with a room to himself for the first time. He begins working in the dining hall to fund his studies, which introduces him to the diverse array of students aiming to become ministers. Despite his academic commitment, reticence and a speech impediment often leave him feeling out of place. Yet, he finds solace in academics, engaging deeply with subjects like philosophy and history under the guidance of influential professors.

A pivotal influence during his time in Nashville is Kelly Miller Smith, a civil rights leader and minister who inspires Lewis with his dynamic preaching. Often facing a divide among the faculty and students—those focusing solely on ministry versus those advocating for social change—Lewis sides with the latter, igniting his interest in civil rights issues. His awareness of these challenges is heightened by the integration battles occurring in other Southern regions.

Attending meetings with the NAACP introduces Lewis to Nashville's vibrant civil rights community, where he meets prominent figures and learns about activist philosophy, particularly nonviolence as advocated by Gandhi. His connections deepen through friendships with fellow students, particularly with Harold Cox, who guides him through this new landscape. Despite initial friendships with more carefree students, Lewis remains committed to social justice work, encouraged by leaders like Smith and the urgency of the times.

As the 1959 semester begins, Lewis, motivated by the need for change, becomes more involved in social activism, ultimately leading to the planning of sit-ins to desegregate Nashville's lunch counters. Inspired by the possibility of practicing nonviolent resistance, Lewis's experience in this chapter sets the stage for his future role as a prominent figure in the civil rights movement, revealing both personal growth and a burgeoning sense of purpose .